

VICTIM IMPACT STATEMENT

MICHELLE HORD ON BEHALF OF GABRIELLE EILEEN WHITE

I first want to offer my incredible gratitude to the jury. They were subjected to images and stories that they will never forget and I will forever be grateful for their honorable civic service.

I have written and rewritten *this* statement a million times in the past two years. Through every razor-blade cut of trauma, memory, pain, confusion, betrayal and disbelief.

Through flashes of the crime scene.

Through hearing the radio track of a screaming nanny or a grandmother repeating incessantly that she had given birth to a monster.

As I walked between my father and my brother into the medical examiner's office to identify the child that this murderer and I brought into the world together.

I never even got to hold her.... because of what had been done to her precious little body.

The words and the reality of this statement have haunted me. Constantly.

The gravity pulled me down while picking white funeral dresses for Gabrielle and me. When trying to gently comb her beautiful soft hair into little puffs and cover up the stitching around her head where an autopsy incision had occurred.

I wrote bits of this in my head while placing this doll, Barbara, who was Gabrielle's first friend and earliest memory, into her casket.

Because of the unimaginable evil perpetrated against my baby, most of her things were relegated to crime lab evidence.... So, as I closed Gabrielle's casket, I picked Barbara up... and I now carry her with me everywhere. ...even discretely hidden in a handbag while I testified during the trial. I sleep with her every night. She is one of my few desperate reminders that there was once magic and beauty and that it was consciously destroyed.

This is one of the hardest things I have ever had to write...but not the hardest.

I wrote Gabrielle's obituary. I wrote my thriving and bright-eyed baby's eulogy...days before she was robbed of completing the second grade.

So, I have written a victim's impact statement in my head and on paper...at the doctor's office...at the funeral home...In the shower...in the middle of the night when I can't sleep as flashes of this violent nightmares haunt me... And here we are.

Today.

Finally.

I can only pray it is enough.

This convicted felon, this former son, husband, uncle, father and friend...who talked about songs he imagined dancing to with our baby at her wedding.... Has nonchalantly and unemotionally sealed his fate. He has committed the most heinous and unimaginable act...literally against his own flesh and blood...an act incomprehensible to anyone who has ever touched the softness of a child's hand or heard a baby laugh.

Before this felon chose to sell his soul and cowardly opt out of humanity, we would have ongoing existential debates about what was more powerful – LOVE or HOPE. For those who read the bible, have ever attended a wedding, or ever truly loved someone... the answer seems obvious....as it did to him. Certainly, it was LOVE.

I did not agree... and unfortunately, I was right.

I knew it wasn't LOVE.

I knew it was HOPE.

I knew that evil and broken people could manipulate and literally murder love. They could twist the word and use it as a threat or a weapon. I knew love, like water, was only held safely when it was in a vessel that was not cracked, or broken or smashed to pieces. I did everything within my power and the confines of the law to try to protect Gabrielle and myself. I will always be haunted with the questions of what I could have done differently...what I may have missed.

Your honor, as was established during the trial, Neil, Gabrielle and I are all asthmatic. There is nothing more frightening for someone with asthma than not being able to breathe. Yet, this man decided to play God and literally took my baby's breath away.

He took the life and breath out of his already thin legacy, his twisted version of love, his future, his family and his community. Asthmatics know the terror of not being able to easily inhale and exhale...and yet...Gabrielle's daddy willfully and evilly chose to take that away from a baby who he once seemed to love and a daughter who he ultimately used as a pawn.

A man, who helped bring Gabrielle into the world...who had her memorize the expression: "What is daddy's number one job? To Protect me!" ...she would always respond with that glowing smile.

A man who recited bedside prayers with us every night thanking God for our family.... And praying for our continued health and safety....

This is NOT a Singular Victim Impact Statement.... this is a statement for a generation of little children who had nightmares after hearing what their friend's daddy did to her.

This is a statement for schoolmates who wrote me to say that Gabrielle was their first or only friend.

This is a statement for first cousins, a girl scout troop, an elementary school, a church, a family, a community.

This is a statement for a grandfather who treasured his granddaughter and visited her EVERY Sunday. Who somehow possessed the courage and fortitude to sit in this courtroom every

day...even when I couldn't... and expose himself to all of the horror because he felt it was his last chance to protect and stand up for his baby girl and for mine.

And yet, I somehow stand alone in this unfathomable loss. I am Gabrielle's mother. It is the proudest title I have ever had and every will. As a woman who was told from teenaged years that conceiving may not be possible...I wanted no career....no life...no dreams...more than to be a mother. Miraculously it happened at 39 and somehow, I was chosen to carry this unbelievably healthy and special little girl.

I now fight sometimes to breathe. The start of the school year, holidays, familiar songs we would sing together, birthdays that mark ages and stages she will never reach.... this is not a loss that any educated professional has dared to tell me will pass like the typically five stages of grief. My heart and soul have literally been ripped from my body by this man. Our families, our friends, our community, will never ever be the same.

You honor, I live in fear. Next to Barbara in my bag is my order of protection. I still have moments where I imagine Neil's escape, or smashing in my car window when I am parked somewhere familiar from our past. I now know what he is capable of...and it is terrifying and will never change.

Neil, you chose to murder Gabrielle. You did it with steel in your veins. Your version of "LOVE" suffocated everything that was ever good, or righteous or possible around you.

YET, despite the intentional and arsenic act you committed against so many...your demonic plan to suffocate the oxygen that filled beautiful Gabrielle and all the love around you... you made one cataclysmic error.

You underestimated hope.

And despite my fear, my devastation and my pain I am still here.

To Hope

To Breathe

To Pray

To tell her story

I now move with a hole in my heart but a purpose in my spirit.

I will die trying to guarantee that the 27 hours I lovingly took to bring that baby girl in to the world wasn't in vain...and that despite your best efforts...you couldn't erase her life.

You often said she would be smarter than you by the time she was ten, so you always knew she was bigger than you. She was bigger than your sick plot. And I am ensuring Gabrielle will now be remembered for what she gave the world in seven short years versus what you did to her.

So, yes, ultimately your thin and self-serving version of love failed. But HOPE remains.

The hope that is the eyes of children across three continents who have access to books and computers in Gabrielle's name.

The hope of scholarship recipients who get to now grasp at their futures.

The hope of children who can dream dreams regardless of their level of ability at Gabrielle's Playground.

The hope that the picture of my beautiful daughter brings to little girls who look like her all over the globe. Strangers in foreign lands now wear bracelets and buttons bearing her name and face. They know she mattered.

And they now know that her life has extended THEIR possibilities and has given them a HOPE of their own.

Just 48 hours ago, the Gabrielle's Corner Resource Center, in a township in South Africa celebrated their first anniversary...they are grateful and forever changed...

They say her name.

Despite my nightmares and the fight and faith it requires each day for me to literally get out of bed, I somehow have to go on.

And so, your honor, as I live and wake each day in both sorrow and fear, it is my deepest hope and most impassioned plea that for every breath this convicted felon takes for the rest of his life...he will take it incarcerated...

He will inhale and exhale in confinement.

He will inhale and exhale judgement and be sentenced to the strongest possible punishment our state will allow.

It is my sincere hope and prayer that your honor will confine Neil White to the darkness he created.... the fallout of all he tried to burn to the ground...that the ash of his crime will continue to rise and consume him.

There are so many people in this courtroom and around the country who have to somehow stumble now through the darkness in an inexplicable life.

We are covered with the ash of what remains. Yet we will continue with hope to celebrate Gabrielle's life...even as we breathe each breath aware of her painful absence.

And because of MY hope in the truth and the judicial system, I am imploring that your honor assure justice. Because justice...like truth, even when crushed and suffocated into the earth... can rise again.